MASS. HS30.400: G28/4

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AUG 10 1989

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CLEANING PROCEDURES FOR AMBULANCE EQUIPMENT AND INTERIOR

Any piece of equipment or surface can become contaminated with any number or type of viruses and/or bacteria, especially those items that come in contact with the victim's mouth, nose or body fluids (i.e. blood). Since many people may be unaware that they are carrying a communicable disease, it is important for EMTs to adhere to a routine cleaning regimen every day.

After every patient treatment or transport, EMTs should clean any obviously "dirty" equipment and the ambulance interior to minimize the spread of microorganisms. Any spilled blood must be cleaned up at the first available opportunity. The mostly important part of the cleaning dislodges not only dirt, but also any microorganisms that may be present. For items that are not obviously dirty, a simple washing with hot water and detergent should suffice.

For "hard surface" items, such as the walls and floor of the ambulance, the stretcher, cot mattress, backboards, splints, etc., the EMT should SCRUB these items with hot water and detergent. This should be followed by a scrubbing with an approved disinfectant or a dilute bleach solution (1 part bleach to 10 parts water), followed by a rinse with clear hot water. Allow surfaces to air dry. (NOTE: Wooden backboards and splints must be kept well varnished to prevent water damage and absorption of contaminated fluids.) For "soft surface" items, such as face masks, suction units, bag-valve-mask and demand units, EMTs should check the manufacturers instructions for the preferred cleaning method.

In general, such items should be scrubbed, while holding them under the surface, in hot water and detergent and then rinsed in hot water. Small brushes may be necessary to clean hard to reach areas.

Next disinfect the items following the manufacturers specific instructions with respect to the use of alcohol, dilute bleach or other disinfectants. Some of these products may stain, damage or be absorbed into some rubber, plastic or foam products. Alcohol will harden, discolor and eventually crack most plastic materials. Dilute bleach may corrode certain metals and plastics.

Allow items to air dry in order to dissipate fumes prior to use and place them into plastic, self-closing storage bags to protect them from contamination (i.e. face masks, oral/nasal airways, EGTA tubes, bite sticks, laryngoscope blades, etc.). EGTA tubes, airways and bite sticks should be sent for packaging and sterilization after this initial cleaning.
(NOTE #1: Items marked disposable must never be reused!)

NOTE #2: During the above cleaning steps, EMTs should wear heavy duty rubber gloves to protect their hands from hot water, detergents, etc.

Many hospitals will cooperate with local ambulance services and accept ambulance equipment for sterilization at the hospital. Contact the infection control, central service, sterile supply or other department that maintains the sterilization equipment. You will be advised as to how the equipment must be prepared and the maximum size that will fit into their sterilization device.

In general equipment must be disassembled, thoroughly cleaned and packaged in wrappers they may provide. IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO SEPARATE heat and moisture sensitive items from more durable items. Hospitals use a high pressure steam autoclave that sterilizes at very high temperatures (250-280 degrees F). For more sensitive equipment, such as plastics, rubber and electronic items, an ethylene oxide gas sterilizer is used. When delivering items to be sterilized, be sure to label these items appropriately so they are not damaged by steam sterilization. Do not mix gas and steam sterilizable items in the same packages. Hospital personnel will give you more specific steps to follow.

Oxygen humidifiers (non-disposable) should be cleaned and fresh, distilled sterile water changed at least once a week. Use of plastic, disposable humidifier units is preferred, since each unit may be either transferred with the patient or disposed of after each use.

Linen and uniforms should be laundered in hot water and detergent. When appropriate, use laundry bleach according to directions. (Liquid bleach should not be used on most colored fabrics.) *Helpful hint: Blood stained fabrics can be soaked in hydrogen peroxide and cold water prior to laundering.*

REMEMBER, many organisms which have the potential for causing infection can be transmitted to others when emergency care equipment is not properly cleaned. This is especially true of face masks, bag-valve-mask units, demand valve units and suction units. It is important to completely disassemble and clean these units after each use. EMTs must ensure a safe working environment for themselves and their patients by adhering to a routine cleaning regimen. These cleaning procedures apply to all cases involving any communicable disease (i.e. AIDS, hepatitis B, tuberculosis, etc.). There are no other "special" procedures necessary if the preceding cleaning regimen is adhered to.